

**Interview with Chris Hickman [CH]**  
**Occupation: Fisherman**  
**Port Community: Hatteras, NC**  
**Interviewer: Azure Cygler [AC]**  
**Date: July 19, 2012**  
**Catch Share Oral Histories Project – NOAA Fisheries**  
**Logger/Transcriber: Matthew Schult**  
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**Phone interview**

**Interview**

[00:00]

AC: Ok, so to begin, my name is Azure Dee Cygler. It's the 19<sup>th</sup> of July, 2012, and I am doing a phone interview with Chris Hickman. And Chris, if you could begin by just stating your full name and address, for the record?

CH: Christopher Steven Hickman; Hatteras, North Carolina.

AC: Ok. And your home port, Chris?

CH: Hatteras.

AC: Ok, Hatteras, North Carolina. And how many vessels do you own?

CH: One.

AC: One. And the name?

CH: " 'Bout Time. "

AC: " 'Bout Time." And that's b-o-u-t?

CH: Yeah, no "A."

AC: Ok. Chris, are you in a sector or in the common pool?

CH: I'm in the common pool.

AC: Common pool, ok. And if you don't mind my asking, how young are you?

CH: I'm sixty-three.

AC: Ok. And to open with a general context of your life, could you tell me a little bit about yourself? You know, where you're from, how long you've been where you are, and sort of how you got into fisheries?

CH: Well, I was born on the eastern shore of Virginia, and I grew up farming. My grandfather fished. He and his brothers had to quit in 1916, because there weren't enough fish to catch. [So they] bought farms, and that's how I ended up growing up farming.

Then farming got crappy in the mid to early '70s. Well, [let me] back up a little bit. My father had a stroke [during] my senior year of high school, so I stepped out of school and started tending about 800 acres of land. By the time I was twenty-one, it was 1200 acres.

AC: Oh, wow.

CH: And then we had the fuel crunch, and all that stuff, in the early seventies, which really put a burden on having operating capital. I couldn't see losing what my mother and grandmother already had, so I ran away, retired, and went fishing.

AC: So fishing was a retirement from farming, huh?

CH: Yes, but they're very, very parallel.

AC: Ok.

CH: Particularly the decision-making part of it; the tough financial decisions, and the hardships on the family, when things don't go well. But, they're our ways of life. Its not so much a job, it's an occupation. And I work for the non-fishing public. That's how I feel about it. The idea that we want to kill, or shoot, the last buffalo is really a ridiculous philosophy, because I would like to have something to do next year; and the year after, and the year after. And hopefully my children and grandchildren will be able to do it, if they so choose.

AC: Ok. Now, do you still own that family farmland?

CH: No, if you own a little bit of land in that area, your tendency is to rent [the] land and your own equipment. We still have a little bit, but it's divided up between my brother and my sister. And it doesn't amount to very much, other than part of it [being] my mother's family home. I haven't thought

about going back [to] doing it in a long, long, long time, so I guess I'm pretty well planted here.

AC: Ok. So since the beginning, you were a Hatteras born, and raised resident?

CH: No, born and raised [on the] eastern shore [of] Virginia.

AC: Eastern shore [of] Virginia, ok. Sorry, you did say that. And then [you] moved to Hatteras to fish?

CH: Yeah, I moved to Hatteras about thirty-seven years ago.

AC: Ok. And do you have a wife and children?

CH: Yeah, I have a wife of about thirty-five years, and a son that's thirty-two. He's a graduate of UNC [University of North Carolina] Chapel Hill. And I've got a daughter's [who's] twenty-eight, and a graduate of East Carolina.

AC: Ok. Are any of them doing fishing-related work?

CH: No, my son's a deputy sheriff. He fishes with me occasionally, [and] he would do it if he saw a future in it. I mean, he certainly has the ability, there's no doubt about that. My daughter and my wife both work in the tourist business. One works for a locally owned store, and the daughter works for a company that's got a franchise down here.

AC: Ok. And your educational background?

CH: Military school. I was a bad boy. No, not really. See, I was at the start of the change in school systems with desegregation, and it was an educational decision.

AC: Ok, I see. And Chris, what sort of fishing do you do currently, and have you done in the past?

[06:00]

CH: Well, I came to Hatteras chasing sport fish: billfish, and blue marlins, and stuff. Did that for about five years; then I got tired of moving every six months. We'd go down to Fort Pierce and Stuart, Florida and fish during the winter, and [then] fish Hatteras in the summer.

Then I got into the commercial part of it here in the winter, gillnetting for trout, croaker, bluefish and that kind of stuff. And as you made a little bit, you

tried to better yourself. You know, as time comes along, bigger boats, more gear, work in a little more weather. And it just progressed into when the permitting system came, into get what permits I could get. Ended up buying a multispecies permit, [for] monkfish down here. We spent some summers in New England, groundfishing and monkfishing. And here we are today.

AC: Ok. And was that mostly inshore or offshore?

CH: Most of what I did up there is what I would call inshore fishing.

AC: Ok, so you would be gone for a day or two?

CH: Just a day. We were a day boat.

AC: Day boat, ok. So that's always been the case?

CH: Yes. [For] about a year, I worked on a big trawl boat. I really liked that, but I wanted to be on my own.

AC: And how big is the *'Bout Time*?

CH: Forty-four foot.

AC: And gillnetting, you said?

CH: Yes.

AC: Ok. So Chris, has your role changed in the fisheries since sectors began? For instance, going from a captain to a crew or something along those lines?

CH: No, I'm on the real fringe of that. I don't have enough multispecies landings to justify going back to New England. I guess the biggest thing it did for me, [was] cut out an option. Not enough days, and not enough weight to justify moving the boat that far to do it.

And when stuff first started coming down, I used to lease my days, or pretty much gave them, to a couple of friends of mine up there. Said they could have them to use. We did a little trading.

I really enjoyed fishing up there; it was neat. But as it is now, I mean, with the expense of business, the boat needs to gross \$1,000 a day. It's one thing to do less than that in my own backyard, but when you're on the road, you're supporting two households. Plus your crew and [their] families have to live, too.

AC: Sure.

CH: And with that system, you're pretty much handcuffed. You can't take advantage of the day. You used to [be able to] go out and fish, and try to work for consistency. And then you get the opportunity to help yourself a little bit. Well, now you can't do it. You can't take advantage of what's put in front of you.

AC: So it pins you to monkfishing then, pretty much?

[09:30]

CH: Yes. I'm one of about 170 permits, out of a little better than 700, which fully utilize their monk permits.

AC: Ok. Now, it sounds like you sort of had to do that, but is it something you enjoy?

CH: Oh no, I enjoy bopping monks. Have you ever seen a picture of a monkfish?

AC: Oh, I've touched many, and they're very bizarre.

CH: When we're fishing the gillnet stuff, we hit them with a rubber hammer.

AC: Ok, just to...?

CH: So they don't eat your hands off.

AC: Yeah, they're quite the creatures; that's for sure.

CH: It's a face only a mother could love.

AC: But they're delicious, so that serves you guys well for a fishery.

CH: Yeah. [In] a given year, it probably makes up anywhere from half to not quite two-thirds of my income. And that's been quite restricted. Most fishermen have a real problem with the sampling methods of NOAA [National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration].

AC: Ok, meaning observer coverage sampling?

CH: No, not the observer coverage. It's the information they use for their research, or how they use their research boat.

AC: Ok, I see.

CH: Take, for instance, the monk fishery; we fish a lot of times under twenty fathoms. I mean, we do fish deeper at a given time, but predominantly we're under twenty fathoms. Particularly down here in the south, because the continental shelf is so wide, we don't have to go to the deep water. And when you've got a research boat, or a sample boat, that can't come and go in under twenty fathoms, then you're losing a lot of [the] territory we fish in. So you're not getting a true picture of the total population.

AC: Now has that driven you to apply for co-operative research projects at all?

CH: Yeah, I've worked with Dr. Andrea Johnson, out of University of Maryland, Eastern Shore, for three or four years now on the monks. And then I work with Dr. Roger Riddleson, out of East Carolina University, on spiny dogfish.

AC: Ok, so you're real involved.

CH: Yes.

AC: And is that sporadically or is that a set thing each year?

CH: Well, it depends on what information they want, and how the grants come down. With the monks, they have their research set aside program. I get extra days to do the work, and the sale of the fish funds the project.

The spiny dogfish [project] is a state thing. It used to be a million dollars a year, but it's been cut pretty hard. But we still have it. You submit a project to the state, and they allocate you money. You actually get paid for your work, but you can't keep any fish.

Right now, the dogfish have been tagged with acoustical tags. We have a listening array here off the beach, so we track them that way. And we also tow a receiver around, looking for them. We also record other fish that have been tagged by somebody else, somewhere else, too. You get a lot of interesting clicks and beeps, which I think is good. The only problem is it takes so damn long for the information to get accepted.

AC: Yeah.

CH: It took about twelve years for the first stuff we did to get accepted.

AC: Oh boy.

CH: You know you'd think, the older it is the better it is, but we could've been doing it wrong in the past, too. So that doesn't make it any better than what we did yesterday.

AC: Yeah, I hear you. Now, is that something that ends up being financially advantageous to you, or is it more just sort of a good cause in your eyes?

CH: Kind of both. I get a day for the boat. Some days it's better than fishing; some days it's not near as good. But I'm hoping in the long run, it helps my community, my friends.

AC: Now tell me a little bit about your crew members. How many do you have, and has that changed since sectors?

CH: Well, that's always been a floating deal; anywhere from one to three, depending on the fishery we're in. Sometimes it's just one man and a mate on the boat, sometimes it's up to three.

This spring [when] we were catching smooth dogs, or sand sharks, I had three men on the crew, because we had to process everything right on the boat. For monkies, it's usually three of us on there. And a lot of times when I'm fishing for Spanish and king mackerels, it'll be anywhere from one to two on the boat. I got one man that's married; he's just over forty. And the other boy's twenty-six, with a wife and child.

AC: Ok. And have sectors changed the dynamics with crew? Are they more or less transient, or has it not affected it really?

CH: I don't know; it's kind of a rotation thing around here. I've had everybody that everybody else has had, and they've had everybody I've had.

AC: A small pool of people you're working with, then.

[17:40]

CH: Yeah, and it's gotten smaller. There used to be plenty of help. [With] this being a tourist community for the greater part of the year, a lot of the guys that worked in the kitchens, bussed tables, washed dishes, whatever, were the extra help in the winter. The winter used to be our big, big fishing time here. And they also worked at the fish house. That was our pool of help. So they ended up having fairly steady year-round employment, doing different things.

And, a little historical thing on that page, my father-in-law is seventy-three, I think. He was born and bred here, and the most fish houses he ever saw here was seven; the least was three. In the time that I've been here, it had been seven, and now we're down to three again. And it's hard for them, the ones that are doing business. It's not easy, because we can't produce like we have [been]. I mean, some fish cycles are good, and they're still seasonal. The thing that drew me to Hatteras was [that] there was always something to fish for year-round.

[My father-in-law] graduated from high school, and the next day he was at the Coast Guard recruiter. He spent his twenty-two years in the military, [because] there wasn't anything going on here. In my generation, there was a whole crowd of us [that] moved here in the mid-seventies to the early eighties. And we became the next generation of fishermen out here. But now, it's become what it was when I got here; [except now] there's nobody to take our place.

AC: I see.

CH: So, it's just like I said about my son. If he felt like there was a future in it, he'd be right there beside me. [By] now he'd probably have the boat, and I'd be in a skiff.

AC: And [do] you feel that's the same way for your fishing peers? Are their kids not particularly interested, because it's not appealing?

CH: No, I know there are three kids here. [Well], what I'd call kids; they're in their early twenties. [They're] working at it right now, in this village. And then there's one, about ten years old; if it wiggles, he's chasing it, and everything.

I guess we're supposedly talking more about what's going on in New England, than what's going on in the mid-Atlantic. But now, this place has [become] over-developed. [Well], I wouldn't say over-developed in one sense, but the way they did it was another [thing].

Everybody thinks that if we don't have tourists here, then it's nothing. Well, they're getting stepped on by the (National) Park Service, and finding out that people come to Hatteras Island for the beach. And now they don't have all the access they thought they were going to have. It's gotten just as complicated as fishing. You've got to have permits to go on the beach. Then you can't go on this part of the beach, and you can't walk here, and all kinds of stuff. So this place is hurting all the way around.



And nobody wants to realize that the fishermen in this village are the first people to start the economy, after hurricanes. They kind of brush us, off under the carpet. We turn over the first dollar in the community after that. We get ourselves straightened out, help our neighbors get straightened out, [and] then we go back to work. We're not standing there with our hands out wanting somebody to help us. In fact, we really can't get any help, because we're under the radar.

I was told one time about borrowing some cheap money, I had too much and not enough; too many assets, not enough debt. If I was in debt that badly, I probably wouldn't have any assets left, [and] I wouldn't be here trying to borrow money.

But you know, when I came here, there weren't any divisions [between] types of fishery; it was all-inclusive. Charter boats fished in the summer, [while] some people fished commercially year-round. And a lot of the people that fished charter boats in the summer, fished commercially all winter. So we had a lot of collaboration amongst everybody.

AC: But that's changed?

CH: We're losing that. We've got all our eggs in one basket here in this area, and it's coming back to haunt [us].

AC: Ok, so that's affected relationships between fishermen as well?

CH: Not really.

AC: The way you treat each other, that's all...?

CH: Not, not on the local level. I mean, everybody knows everybody. We have more trouble [with new] people wanting to draw lines. It's people that come here and bring their boat. The first thing [they do] is move into an area, say how much they love it, and then want to live here. And the next thing you know, he's running for the Board of Commissioners, and trying to change it to exactly like where he came from. What the hell did you come here in the first place for?

AC: That's right, they've overlooked the charm.

[23:55]

CH: I mean, it's just like me. I came here for what the place had to offer; it fitted my psyche real well. I didn't want to change anything, but my mere presence

made the change. And people don't ever look at it that way. [They say], "We want all this, we want all that." Well, this is one county that sends money to the State; we don't draw anything from [it]. So the more services you want, [the more] you'll end up having to withdraw from somewhere else.

You know, fishermen are a pretty self-sufficient bunch. I don't feel like there's a lot of people [that] could deal with our decision process; we're always willing to be wrong. [When] I go out, I've got a fifty-fifty chance of turning the right way. And if I turn the wrong way, so what? I turn back and go the right way, and don't think anything of it.

AC: Now, is Hatteras a fishing community; or has it ever been? And has fishing been something that the wider community members follow, and respect? What's your take on that?

CH: Ask that one more time.

AC: Is Hatteras a fishing community? Has it ever been one, in your thirty or so years of living there? And do people in general sort of recognize fishing issues; do they follow it?

CH: This place is...hello?

AC: Yeah, I've got you.

CH: This place was a fishing village from its first day of existence, back to colonial days. See, Hatteras is in the Outer Banks, North Carolina; so all we are on is a thin ribbon of sand.

AC: Tenuous.

CH: Yeah. There are places [where] I can still throw a baseball across. And the highway's in the middle.

But, it's like all of the first colonial places settled in this country, [with] the fishing; whatever it took to survive. Then they caught more than they needed, and then they started shipping it. In the time that I've been here, I've seen winters [with] a hundred boats working out of here.

AC: Wow, from all over the...?

CH: From all over; from down towards Moorehead, and up from Wanchese. Up in that area, Manteo, and from Virginia.

You know, it just depended on what a man had to do to make a living to support his family; it's what he did. That's how I got into fishing in New England. It wasn't so much that I couldn't have done something here, but I kind of got involved in the monkfishing, and I made friends up there. And they said, "Well, you know, you can buy a permit." And, it wasn't cheap, but it was within the budget. So that's what I did.

I went and did something I never thought I'd ever do. You know, new experience, new people, new areas; and I happened to make a little money out of it. I think maybe there's some jealousy in that part. [Because] I do what I want to do, not as much [now] as I used to; and I happen to make a living at it.

AC: Jealousy in terms of people in your home port, in Hatteras?

CH: No.

AC: Just in general?

CH: Let me back up here. I could have stayed home, and probably gotten by. But traveling and doing something different kept the excitement going. We'll leave it at that.

AC: Would your wife come with you, when you were in New England; or would she stay back home?

CH: No, we had two young kids.

AC: Ok. They were young at the time, I see.

[27:55]

CH: Yeah. Well, middle school. They were old enough to understand what was going on. And she's always worked. I mean, she's one of those people [who] would go crazy without a job. And all this time she's made a lot of difference in what we ate for the week.

It was kind of an adventure, and we lucked out at it. Caught some stuff I'd never seen before. [Plus] I enjoy meeting people from different places anyway.

AC: Cool, an adventurous spirit.

CH: I'm a pirate, in some areas.

AC: Now, one of the things this oral history is looking to understand is friendship. Do you socialize with other fishermen? Is that where you think the majority of your friendship base is; or does it vary? Just sort of describe to me your social circles.

CH: Well, I usually divide things up. You've got about three friends in life; people you depend on, no matter what. The rest of them are good acquaintances. I feel like I have a lot of acquaintances, and I have the three good friends. And it is a social network. I mean, at least once a week I talk with somebody from New Hampshire or Massachusetts.

AC: These are other fishermen?

CH: Yeah.

AC: Ok. Monkfishermen, or it doesn't matter?

CH: Well, we all travel the monkfish/groundfish circle. And then once you [start] talking about stuff in the mid-Atlantic, I have other people that I've known for years. And we stay in touch.

Fishermen are pretty well connected, as far as what's going on somewhere else; [knowing what] they might need to go do. And [in] trying to decipher what the government's throwing at us.

AC: You bounce things off each other a little bit?

CH: Yeah. Maybe if I didn't understand what they're writing, [then they'll] understand.

AC: Now, would you say that these friendships sort of include families as well? Is your wife involved when you socialize with these fishermen; or is it more of a one-on-one interaction?

CH: With fishermen, it's one-on-one. There are a few couples that we are inter-connected with.

This island's got about 4,500 people year-round. Here in the village, it's about 500 year-round. About half of them, maybe a third of them now, were born here. And it's people she went to school with, who are still here.

AC: Ok, so her social circles aren't necessarily fishing families; it's people she's known for a long time.

CH: Right.

AC: So Chris, [have] your families' long-term life plans changed, since sectors started, in May 2010?

CH: Yes.

AC: How would you say?

CH: Well, we worked very hard to raise our children, and get them educated. We put every bit that we made into them, and into the business. We were able to save a little bit, [but] that's disappeared in the last two years.

This was supposed to be [the] time for us to help ourselves. [But now] we can't do it, because we can't take advantage of a given situation. In fishing, [you] deal with [variables like] weather, [especially] in small boat operations like I have; and [it's hard] if you can't take advantage of [ideal] situations. Or, just for the sake of conversation, [are only] allowed 1,300 pounds of monkfish a day, like I am.

If I go through my gear, and I've got more than that, I can do what we call a "double." [And] that's good, but that only takes up two of the five nets I've got in the water. Then, I've got to try to get back the next day, or the day after. And if the weather doesn't play to my favor, then I'm losing product. I end up with a poorer quality product than I want. So it becomes counter-productive [to] catch the fish, [since] you can't bring them home.

We're pretty good at knowing about how much net we need, but you're always looking to worst-case scenario. And then there are the times that you get trapped. You know, its Mother Nature giving you something, but you can't [take] it, because Man says you can't.

I'll give you an example. One February, we ended up [with] about ten days in a row [where] we couldn't fish. When the ocean gets rough, fish scatter; they don't hang around. [Well, we] finally got out, and rode all over the ocean. About two-thirds of the way through the day, I find a little place [with] spiny dogfish, [so] we set the nets. I said, "Well, it's about two o'clock in the afternoon. We'll run the nets out, let them soak a little while, and then start picking them up." Well, I had the dogfish. I had 160 boxes of dogfish, at 16 cents [a pound], I think. And I [had to] throw 3,000 pounds of striped bass, and probably 1,500 pounds of bluefin tuna, away. So I had to fish two more crappy-ass days to try to make up for it. My crew and my family needed

money; [to] pay rent, [the] electric bill, [to put] food on the table. And there I [was], wasting perfectly good product.

AC: So, it sounds like there are effects of these management measures on the resource then?

CH: Well, that's pretty universal. I think you'll hear that from all over. The only thing about catch-shares, or sectors, that sounds good to a fisherman, is you have "X" amount of pounds to catch. You're allowed this percentage, of whatever the total allowable catch is.

"You catch it all in one day, or you [can] spread it over a month." This is what they like to tell you. That's great, but it's the garbage that's tacked onto it. This accountability thing is not a bad thing, but it's also a nail in the coffin; because you're trying to micro-manage species.

AC: Ok. Now, why did you choose to join the common pool, versus being in the sector? You were kind of eluding to...?

CH: Well, I didn't have enough weight to really contribute to a sector. I even tried to give it to a sector, so somebody would [benefit] from it. But, I'm better off letting somebody lease my Days from me. I mean, the Days are cheap.

AC: You said you tried; did you end up doing that? Or did it not work out for some reason?

CH: I think this is the first year I haven't done it, since you could lease your Days out. And whatever we can do to create waste, is what we're doing.

AC: Right. Does the idea of a sector become more appealing now? Or is it less appealing, as things change for you?

CH: It's just as unappealing to me [now] as it's ever been. [From] the reading I've done about it, it's certainly not a conservation plan.

I feel like it's a hostile take-over, with a Ponzi scheme [by] the boys with the big pockets, i.e., "Big Food." You know, "We buy up all the permits, and then we've got it for ourselves. When we stack them, then we control the resource."

Who built this country? The little man. The guy that got up in the morning, went to work, wanted to be left alone, supported his family, and generated consistent income in his community. Bigger is not always better.

AC: And do you directly see that in Hatteras? Do you see bigger companies, or boats, or conglomerates?

CH: No. The fish that we catch a lot of falls into the category of chicken and pork; it's what feeds the masses.

AC: What are some of those species that you're referring to? Did you mention bluefish?

CH: Yeah: bluefish, weakfish, croakers, spots, and trout.

AC: Ok, so not high ticket items?

[38:30]

CH: No, we're used to fishing [high] volume at a low price. I hate to say that, but that's [true]. [The price of] my grandfather's fish isn't far from [what] I get. [Prices] haven't risen because of cost of doing business.

I made more money on twenty-five cent fish than I do now on seventy-five cent fish, plus the price of doing business. Fuel, gear; all that stuff has risen. I mean, my nets are a derivative of petroleum, so you can understand, how it goes up with all of that.

I was told I was an untrained observer, because I only see what I want to see. But, I feel like I see what's there. And if it's there, and I can see it, feel it and touch it, then it must be there. Go back to Cheech and Chong "Up in Smoke".

AC: Now Chris, you've sort of been alluding to these, but what are some of the pros and cons of being in the common pool? And also, the pros and cons of being in a sector? Obviously you're not in a sector, so you might not [know]. But you have a concept of it, certainly. If you could give me some thoughts on that?

CH: Well, the basic reason that I stayed in the common pool was the cost of getting into the sector. In other words, I [would have] had to recover the weight I donated to the sector, [as well as pay] the cost of joining a sector. I saw it as prohibitive, [to] pay for no more weight than I had. At least in the common pool, I had some time and weight. And if I wanted to go burn my time, then I had the choice to go do that.

Whereas in the sector, if my weight was one percent of the total sector allocation, [and] you average it in with everybody else, I can go catch that in one day; or I could spread that over two weeks. I didn't like the idea that I

[would be] paying somebody to sit there and tell me how to manage my stuff. It [would] cost me ten or fifteen thousand dollars to join a sector. And I don't have ten or fifteen thousand dollars worth of fish.

AC: Ok. So you're getting that cost from, not only paying the manager a percentage of what you land, but just sort of the loss from what you're not doing?

CH: Yeah, that's probably about right.

AC: Ok, so you're thinking [of] not just the direct cost you pay to that sector; but [also] the foregone cost from you being able to fish more flexibly, or on different species?

CH: Yeah. Say I was just going to catch my codfish, and I had 5,000 pounds. Irrelevant of what the government says, I could catch that in five days; a thousand pounds a day.

It [would] cost me \$10,000 to join a sector. [But] it's not worth it, because once I've caught my codfish, I'm done anyway.

AC: Gotcha. And you would have had to relocate up to New England to do that, right? So there'd be a cost of moving and living for what, five days?

CH: Yeah. Let's see, it takes \$1,000 to move the boat, the truck, and assorted equipment, from New Jersey to here. To go up there, spend \$1,000 each way, and end up with \$3,000, and [then have] to pay the crew; it just doesn't [make sense].

AC: So you can lease your Days?

CH: Yeah, [that's] typically what I do. A friend of mine got me some nets, and I gave him some Days. Typically when I've done it for money, it's \$100 a Day, it's no big thing. But it helps them, and it helps me. My Days get used.

AC: [Is] it something you do online, fairly easily? Or [do] people call each other up, and you find a buyer that way?

[44:14]

CH: Well, one's a good friend of mine from up there; we've always jockeyed around at times. And then there's a couple of other guys that call me when they need, or want, a little bit of time. They'll take part, or all, of them, depending on what they think [will] be good for them.



AC: Ok. And is this on a monthly basis, or just once a year?

CH: It happens about once a year.

AC: Ok, so not a huge burden, in terms of you doing these transactions?

CH: No, it's two pieces of paper. You submit it to Sustainable Fisheries, they make sure everything matches up with the boats, and they send you a paper to sign saying it's okay. And [then] he gets one, and that's it.

AC: Ok. Now, are there some sectors that you think are doing better than others? I mean, not being in one, you might not follow the details of them all. But is there a sense [that] one has gotten a fairer deal than another; or is it all pretty equitable across the sectors?

CH: If you talked to the circle that I hang out with, it's men with PMS. Severe cases of it.

But nobody's happy with it. I haven't heard one person say that they were pleased with it, unless [they] really had a [high] percentage of what the allowable catch was.

And, now they're having a consequence closure up there on harbor porpoises. That cuts out all of the inshore fishing up there in the fall, which is their big time of the year.

They say the sectors mitigate some things; allow you to do this and that. But you don't fish when the fish aren't there. The fish aren't there all the time; they're there seasonally. So, you know, it's just like that migration on the Serengeti Plain; it's all kinds of animals together.

AC: Gotcha. Now Chris, do you think sectors and the common pool are fair? I mean, do you think you've gotten a fair deal since sectors began, or not?

CH: I can't say anything good about sectors.

AC: Ok. And the common pool was sort of your only other option?

CH: That's right. I'm a small permit holder, so I didn't have enough to contribute, to justify the expense of it. That's the big thing.

AC: How about health insurance? Do you have health insurance?

CH: Zero, uninsurable.

AC: “Uninsurable?”

CH: Yeah.

AC: Ok. Just due to health issues?

[47:43]

CH: I’ve had high blood pressure for twenty-seven or twenty-eight years. [But] it’s been under control [for] twenty-seven years, and I take my medicine religiously. It’s mostly just [due to] age, and minor things, but [the cost has] probably gotten to \$17,000 a year.

AC: Oh, jeez. Was your wife’s work ever able to pay for health insurance? Or did she ever have it through her work?

CH: No.

AC: So it [was] a direct pay for you?

CH: Oh, yes.

AC: Oh boy. And how about boat insurance?

CH: No.

AC: Do you own your boat outright?

CH: Yeah.

AC: Ok, so it’s a choice. You don’t have to have boat insurance if you don’t want to?

CH: Right.

AC: Is the insurance just a cost-prohibitive issue?

CH: Yes, about \$8,000 a year, for what little bit I do. That’s [only] forty miles offshore; that’s nowhere.

AC: So, just a little bit more about dynamics in your port. Are there both sector members and common pool fishermen in Hatteras?

CH: No sectors here yet.

AC: Ok, so no guys like yourself, who might have fished part-time in New England?

CH: No, I'm an odd duck down here.

AC: Unique, we'll call you unique. You were saying your father-in-law has seen seventy-plus years of changes in the shore-side infrastructure in Hatteras. And you said that's sort of cyclical, so it doesn't seem to be impacted much by changes in regulations. It's just more external forces. How do you view how infrastructure's changed, in terms of fish buyers, and ice houses, and fishing infrastructure?

CH: Well, it's due to the supply of a product. And in turn, a lot of it has to do with regulations.

I have a haul seine operation [that] I could be doing. I could probably be catching some fish, here in the Sound, this year. But we have a 100-pound limit on one of the species that I catch. [So], I don't feel like it's responsible to take two other men, work all day, and then down to the end and say, "Well, we've got too many of this species in here. We can't cull them, we can't get them out of the net." So we'd have to turn them loose, in order to not be breaking the law.

It's probably one of the oldest fisheries in the State. It was always a fishery [where] you could survive, even in a slow time. And it's something an old man can do. That's all that's left here: old men.

But, I got back into it, after [not] doing it for twelve or fifteen years, with the idea of having something to do in my own backyard. And with this one single regulation, it's wiped the whole mess out. [There] seems to be a lot of trout around, but it's nothing to do with the regulation change, or the fish populations. I've sat at a lot of tables and discussed stuff. [But] I've never had a fish sitting next to me, telling me what they were going to do.

AC: Unfortunately. That would be great, for sure. Now, tell me more about those tables. What sort of organizations have you been, and are you [now], involved in?

CH: Well, the Large Whale Take Reduction Team.

AC: The Large Whale Take Reduction...?

CH: "Large Whale Take Reduction Team." [I've been involved] since its' inception. And same thing with the Bottlenose Take Reduction Team. I'm [also] on the Monkfish Advisory Panel, Dogfish Advisory Panel, and a couple of State deals, involving all of that.

AC: So you spend a fair amount of time going to meetings?

CH: I have. I think I've got one in Boston, the 8<sup>th</sup> of August.

AC: Oh, a good time to be up this way; nice and warm at least.

CH: Oh, God.

AC: A bit too warm these days.

CH: Aw, come on now. Look, I'm down here; it's about 88 degrees, [with] almost 90 percent humidity, or better right, now.

AC: Oh boy, I do love it down there. [I've] spent a little bit of time, but that's the tricky part.

CH: Yeah. When I was fishing out of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, it would be 85 or 90 degrees. It was hot, degree-wise, but it would still be about 60 percent humidity. These guys would have two beads of sweat on their forehead, talking about how terrible it was. We'd be sitting there, looking at each other, saying, "What in the hell are they talking about?"

AC: Yeah, well, we're weaklings when it comes to that; that's for sure.

CH: Oh, yeah.

AC: We're soft-skinned, that's right. Now, do you meet a lot of other fishermen through these advisory committees and boards?

CH: Yeah.

AC: Ok, so that's beneficial?

CH: Sure.

AC: Ok. And [are these] friendships, or just acquaintances?

CH: Acquaintances. And [with] one or two of them, it's a friendship, too. Invariably, the group of people that's involved with is small, so you typically

see the same people. That's just like the Take Reduction Teams. There's nobody here to take my place.

AC: So you feel obligated to stay in?

CH: Yeah. I mean, if anybody's going to have an ear to the ground, I'm it; and I don't mind. But we need somebody, one or two of these young kids, to step up. [But all] you hear [is], "Aw man, I've got to go fishing. I can't do that."

[So] I say, "Look, you sit here with your head stuck in the sand. You don't want to pay attention to the other part of the business, then you won't be fishing."

And the meeting deal gets kind of hard. It gets frustrating, and sometimes there's too many in a short amount of time. But it's the other part of doing business. You've got to pay attention to it now.

AC: Ok, so you consider that just a part of running your business?

CH: I mean yeah, that's protecting your interest.

AC: [So] Chris, in your personal free time, which it doesn't sound like there's a lot of, what percentage do you spend with fishermen peers, versus other folks? Would you be able to account for your time in that way?

CH: Well, the other day I was working on gear in my front yard, and a couple of fellas came by, and we were shooting the shit. It's 24-7 in a sense. And it's not that we don't have other interests. I mean, I've given up on my hobbies, because they'd put me in jail.

AC: Hobbies you're calling those, huh? Ok.

CH: Well, some parts of me [were] born about 100 years too late.

AC: Wild West, huh?

CH: Yeah. I enjoy the outdoors, and I used to be a very avid duck hunter. I still fish with a rod and reel. My son and granddaughter, and all of them, go clamming, and things like that. We haven't had a vacation, [or] something I would call a vacation, in thirty years.

AC: Oh my goodness, as a family?

CH: And my daddy was a purveyor of, "Vacations are cheaper than hospital bills." It didn't necessarily mean leaving the county. But most of the time, at the end of August, he and mama went somewhere. If they didn't, we'd get in the car and drive.

AC: Even with the farming business, they still made that a priority?

CH: Oh, yeah.

AC: Wow, that's great.

CH: The thing is, I could take off, but this business is like any other business; you can't get off the merry-go-round, because you're afraid you're going to miss something. [And] you know you only have a certain amount of time to do it in. And [with] with the economy the last couple of years, I had to put a new motor in the boat. So what little bit of money we had saved up, that's disappeared.

AC: Now, you were telling me a story about [how] you were outside in your front yard, doing gear work. That would be considered some personal time. And that was spent talking to a fisherman?

CH: Yeah. Well, they allow them to drive golf carts here in the village. I had one guy, my son's father-in-law, on his golf cart, [who] pulled up under the shade tree. And the neighbor across the street pulled over, and blocked half the road. And then somebody came by in his pick-up, and stopped. [So] we'd sit there and have a conversation for thirty minutes. You know, a little social time, talking about other stuff.

AC: And that's common? That sort of thing happens often?

CH: Yeah, we can stop in the middle of the road and talk to each other. Other places they'd be calling that a riot, or a traffic jam, or something.

AC: Right, disrupting the peace!

CH: We can carry on a conversation from my front porch, to the neighbors' front porch, to my father-in-laws' front porch, without raising our voices much.

AC: So your neighbor is your father-in-law?

CH: Yeah, he's one of them.

AC: Ok, so you're close to your family?

CH: Well, no.

AC: Or, I mean, your wife's family.

CH: My wife's family, yeah.

AC: Sure. Are you involved in any other things in the wider community that might not be fisheries related? Fund-raising committees, or school boards, or town councils; those kinds of things?

CH: No, I don't have time.

AC: Right. It sounds like you're committed to your community, so I was wondering. But [there's] not much time for other...?

CH: No. If you notice, there are always people that are suited to certain things. And I don't play well in public, sometimes. The last meeting I went to, I pissed a person off from NOAA. She got red in the face and stormed off. I told her she was, "well-indoctrinated," and she didn't like it.

AC: Oh, boy.

CH: Well, when you start talking about using information; [and] the best available science is fifteen years old? I mean, I'm sorry. I'm not a rocket scientist, but I'd say that's antiquated.

AC: Yeah, especially when it seems [like] you guys have been getting research of your own, in terms of co-operative studies, that can supplement that quite well.

Now Chris, how do you get paid? Is it just when you land your fish, you get a check? Or how does that work for you?

CH: The way it works, pretty much all up and down, is you pack your fish out for a week. Our week runs from Sunday through Saturday, and then we get paid Tuesday.

AC: Ok. And do sector members get paid the same way? Do you know?

CH: [In] New England, a lot of that's completely different. I don't know if the manager does it. When I was up there, a lot of my fish went to the auction in Gloucester, and I got a check for yesterday's catch today.

AC: Now, has your income changed? You don't have to give me numbers. But, you mentioned half to two-thirds is from monkfishing?

CH: In the last six or eight years, my gross income has dropped in half.

AC: Has dropped, ok. And how have you compensated for those changes? Just scaling back, or...?

CH: Don't spend as much; we don't have quite the free money. But we didn't [really] have free money then. We were raising two kids, and they were together in two years of college.

AC: Wow, that's hefty. And good colleges as well; so probably not cheap.

CH: Yeah. You know, we're alcoholics, and drug addicts, and knuckle-nut-dragging Neanderthals. You wouldn't want to argue with either one of my children.

AC: I bet not.

CH: Quite opinionated, as her father is.

AC: That's good, you've taught her well. That's how you get by in life; not being quiet, that's for sure.

So earnings in your family; you said your wife works? What would you say are the percentages that you contribute, versus your wife? And has this changed? Again, you don't have to give me numbers. But it sounds like it has for you.

CH: It has for me.

AC: Has she had to contribute more?

CH: We're one of those unusual couples. It isn't, "My money and your money." It's always been "our money." So she'll do twenty percent. And I'm talking about gross, not the net.

AC: Sure, ok. And have sectors influenced that change at all?

CH: I can't say yes or no.

AC: Ok. Would you say your overall outlook on life, and well-being, has changed?

CH: Yes.



AC: Ok. And for the better or the worst?

CH: The worst.

AC: Could you give me some specific examples how?

CH: Well, I have to ask the government to go to work in the morning.

You know, we're a group of people who want to get up in the morning, go to work, and be left alone; and don't want to have our hands stuck out. This is where farming and fishing really run parallel. Let me go do what I know how to do.

I have a black box on the boat. [And] no matter what fishery I'm doing, whether it's regulated or [not], I have to go on that computer, and send them a message that I'm going fishing. And I think that's a big infringement upon my movement in this country.

AC: So, when you say it changed for the worse, this is since regulations started? So beyond sectors?

CH: Well, I don't think you can find any fisherman against sensible regulations.

AC: Yeah, that's true.

CH: And we understand some of the complexities of things. Not all problems extend from us catching fish; there's a whole other list of things.

I mean, we can't touch development; if they want to build a ten-room mini-motel, that's fine. And that's why we don't have the local motels we used to have here. In order to get a house down here, you've got to bring your extended family, in order to stay for a week.

AC: It's true. Everybody you know is now invited for our vacation. Big community vacation, everyone! That's true. We've done that as well; rented a home, and had [to invite] a few people to make it work.

CH: A friend of mine said one time, "What we do is a way of life, and it's not something that you can quantify." I don't think it works out well when you try to quantify everything, because there are things that Man's not meant to know. It'd [be better if] we'd learn to work with Mother Nature out here a little bit.

One of my biggest things is figuring out what propels a particular species of fish into great abundance. You look around and [say], “Well, I don’t know if that’s it. Eh, maybe I’ll just put my blinders on, and go to work. This is what has been put in front of me.”

Most of the time when that happens, you’ve got one species on the way up the ladder and another one [that’s] going away. It’s kind of like a law of physics: you and I cannot occupy the same space, at the same time. [Not] when you’ve got things that vie for the same feed, water temperature, kind of bottom, and stuff that’s not measurable.

I read an article in ‘National Fishermen’ about yellowtails, which is a choke species. The survey boat tows at four knots [and finds], “Oh my God, there aren’t enough, there aren’t enough!” The fisherman there says, “I’ve learned [that] two-and-a-half knots is as fast as you want to tow when yellowtail fishing, because your gear doesn’t tow the bottom. It’s a flounder, a flatfish.”

So maybe you know somebody [that] could learn something from all the dumb-ass fishermen.

AC: Well, I thought that the co-operative research push, [with] a lot of projects and money going towards that, was recognition. I had hoped that fishermen could now be recognized beyond “anecdotal information.”

CH: Yeah, “anecdotal” is one of our favorite words.

AC: Yeah. That sounds like it’s been erased, which is good; because that’s quite offensive, no doubt.

CH: I’m on my second doctoral student, working with East Carolina. Anyway, the first one is doing an internship with NOAA up in Silver Springs. We still communicate, and everything. I said, “Well, what’s the difference in education you got in school, and then on my boat?” She was on there two winters. She said, “Quite different.”

The professor that she’s under is good. The information shows he’s not biased any way. No matter where it comes from, if it’s right, it’s right; that’s it. I can deal with that. If I’m wrong and you’re right, I can live with it. But most scientists can’t live with you being right and them being wrong. It’s like, “Aw, you didn’t write all these papers.” I said, “No, my family is what I have to worry about; whether they are going to suffer today, or they’re going to profit.”

AC: Yeah. Now Chris, we just have a few more here. I know I've caught you over an hour here.

CH: Ok, go ahead.

AC: Ok, thank you. [Now], you mentioned you have some health issues. But that doesn't seem to be attributed to fisheries, it's more of a...?

CH: Hereditary.

AC: Yeah. Do you know anyone, or have you yourself, experienced any health issues that could be attributed to sector-based management specifically? Mental or physical health issues?

CH: National Marine Fisheries [Service; NMFS] is the biggest mental problem we have.

AC: Ok, that's the mental health issue?

CH: Yeah.

AC: Ok. I've heard a few folks talk about increased stress. But that might not be something that you or your peers have experienced. We sort of ask that just to see if it has been exacerbated.

CH: You know, when what you do every day has an effect on your family, you're always under stress. But most of us deal with it pretty well. The worst stress is the stuff that you don't notice; the stuff that just kind of eats at you. And that can be anything; the check not getting there in time, that kind of stuff. The real stress and frustration in fishing is on the dock. And when we talk about it, we all get cranked up.

AC: Ok. And has that changed with sectors in place?

CH: All of that depends on what part of the sector you're in; if you're in the good part, or the bottom part.

AC: Yeah, ok. And if someone wanted to get into fishing, what advice would you give them?

CH: Think carefully, and start small. You know, it's kind of hurting [us] that this country's attitude is [all about] instant gratification. My daughter printed out a thing from Bill Gates, who gave a commencement address at a high school. And he said, "Don't think you're going to start out a \$60,000 a year. What's

on television is not real. Don't pick on a nerd; you might work for him some day." He had about ten other things that went along with it. But, you know, life isn't fair.

AC: Yeah. Ok, so you wouldn't necessarily discourage them. Or you wouldn't discourage them at all, it sounds like.

CH: [Not] if I saw somebody that had the drive. But it takes an awful lot of drive and frustration. I mean, for a kid to live here, [with] the property prices, and to buy a house, and support a family, it would be extremely tough.

AC: Ok. [Now], do you think that the future of fisheries is brighter, or less bright, with sectors in place? In general, for your community and New England.

CH: Less bright.

AC: Less bright, ok. If you could go back in time and remove sectors as the management tool, would you do that?

CH: Yes.

AC: Ok. And would you replace it with something else specific?

CH: We all fussed about the Days at Sea. [But] as an interim, go back to Days at Sea, because apparently it seemed to work a lot of times. And then, maybe allow a little more flexibility in trading stuff back and forth.

Probably one of the biggest things that I would encourage is holding the [number of] permits to a boat to no more than two. That way you don't get consolidation. That's one of the biggest things that sectors, or catch-shares, do. [They] consolidate the fleet. Even today, with what I think my permits are worth, it would be hard for some young man to buy my boat, take those permits, make a living, and pay back the cost.

What helps me a lot is that I participate in fisheries that aren't yet regulated. We've gone to the catching spiny dogfish and skates. Now, they're regulated, don't get me wrong. But it's the cash for the trash. That's the filler. Hopefully then you do well monking, and fill up the time with other stuff.

AC: Ok. [So] just in closing Chris, this has been fascinating. You're a great person to speak to; you've a wealth of knowledge.

[1:15:00]

CH: Ah, I doubt that. I'll tell you, off the cuff [whether] its fiction or fact, from Hickman's Almanac of Worthless Knowledge.

AC: On that note, is there something that I haven't asked that you would like to add about your experiences? Or perhaps a story you would want to share for those who might listen to this in future generations?

CH: Well, you know, the biggest thing about this catch-shares stuff that I've read, and I haven't done [any] real extensive reading, but I've read it in Iceland and Pacific northwest, and, oh heck, what's down there off the coast of Australia?

AC: New Zealand, I think. Right?

[1:16:20]

CH: Yeah. You take it there, and big business has ended up with it, or most of it. And fish populations there haven't had any real significant change in them. Iceland's probably a good one on that. I read that the fish are holding their own, at best. And then the rest of it was just people who had deeper pockets, who could afford to buy them.

A friend of mine said something about what a permit was worth. A guy told us, "Well, if you were a scalloper, a monk permit would look real good to you, because then you wouldn't have to discard them." In other words, then you would have another fishery; while you were scalloping, you were [also] monkfishing.

So, as this thing snowballs, you're going to end up with two-dozen boats on the East Coast, with all the scallops and most of the monks. And as time goes on, and you buy up all the permits, you end up being the sole owner of the resource, and no young person can afford to get into it. A good example of catch-shares is the sea clam industry. See how that shrunk.

AC: Right. That was out of the New Jersey area?

CH: Yeah. Well, the biggest portion of it used to be from Virginia to New Jersey. But most of the boats were owned by half a dozen people, and all the processing was owned by the Japanese.

AC: Wow, really?

CH: I'm pretty sure I'm right about how many people are left in it. I fish out of Point Pleasant, New Jersey in the winter. And there used to be twice, no

maybe three times, as many boats working out of there the last thirteen years. Now we're down to three or four boats.

AC: And they're owned by the same company?

CH: Well they're big boats. Danny Cohen and Kate May own a portion of them, and there's one or two more people in it. But it's really consolidated. I did know how many permits were in that.

It was something like the monkfish ratio. We've got 723 permits, and out of [those] 723 permits, about 167 fully utilize them. And just like I was saying, a scalloper buys the under-utilized permits, so he doesn't have to discard them.

You can go back and look at the yellowtail flounder thing. They gave them fish out of the common pool, or sector, so they could keep scalloping. Well, that's their fish now. So a guy that likes to yellowtail, he can't go yellowtailing anymore. I might not be quite correct on that, but that's kind of the scheme of things.

AC: I see. So you're going to stick with it for the long run?

CH: Well, I've got to work until they find me in my skiff with some gillnet, and my dog. And then I want them to take my dog off and shoot it with an arrow, and let me burn right there. Viking funeral.

AC: Goodness gracious. What an exit, that's for sure. A worthy, a noble exit for a noble man.

CH: Yeah, that's right. You know, our children are our only legacy in life. And that's all I want them to say about me: I raised two good kids, and I could catch a fish every now and then. Other than that, it doesn't mean a damn thing.

AC: Excellent, that's a great place to stop. So I'll thank you again, Chris, for your time. If you could just hold on the line for a second? I'll just re-state, for the record, I'm speaking with Chris Hickman on the 19<sup>th</sup> of July, 2012. Thank you, sir. I'll turn off the recorder now.

CH: Ok, then. Thank you, I've enjoyed it.

AC: Ok. Hold on, one sec.

[01:20:23.7]

**END INTERVIEW**